

## Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on:  
Tuesdays with Morrie

### Author: Mitch Albom

Mitch Albom is an award-winning sportswriter novelist, newspaper columnist for the *Detroit Free Press*, syndicated radio host, and TV commentator. He is a graduate of Brandeis University and Columbia University. Before becoming a journalist, Albom was briefly an amateur boxer, nightclub singer, and pianist.

**Name:** Mitch Albom

**Born:** May 23, 1958, in Passaic, NJ

**Education:** Brandeis University, B.A. (sociology), 1979; Columbia University, M.J., 1981, M.B.A., 1982.

**Memberships:** Baseball Writers of America, Football Writers of America, Tennis Writers of America.



### Career:

Journalist and author. *Queens Tribune*, Flushing, NY, editor, 1981-82; contributing writer for *Sport*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and *Geo*, 1982-83; *Fort Lauderdale News* and *Sun Sentinel*, Fort Lauderdale, FL, sports columnist, 1983-85; *Detroit Free Press*, Detroit, MI, sports columnist, 1985—; WLLZ-radio, Farmington Hills, MI, sports director, beginning 1985, co-host of Sunday Sports Albom, 1988-99; WDIV-TV, Detroit, broadcaster and commentator, beginning 1987; Monday Sports Albom (originally Sunday Sports Albom; syndicated weekly sports talk show), host, 1999—. The Mitch Albom Show (nationally syndicated sports talk show), host, beginning c. 1995; Sports Reporters, ESPN, panelist. Composed song for television movie *Christmas in Connecticut*, 1992. Dream Team (charity), founder, 1989; A Time to Help (volunteer organization), founder, 1998. Member of board of directors, Caring Athletes Team for Children's and Henry Ford Hospitals, Forgotten Harvest, and Michigan Hospice.

### Awards:

Award for best sports news story in the United States, 1985; named number-one Michigan sports columnist, Associated Press (AP) and United Press International (UPI), 1985, 1986, 1987, and 1988; named number-one U.S. sports columnist, AP Sports Editors, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, and 1998; named number-one Michigan sports columnist, National Association of Sportswriters and Broadcasters, 1988 and 1989; National Headliners Award as number-two outstanding writer, 1989; awards for best feature, AP Sports Editors, including 1993; named National Hospice Organization Man of the Year, 1999; numerous other awards.

### Past Writings:

*The Live Albom: The Best of Detroit Free Press Sports Columnist Mitch Albom*, Detroit Free Press (Detroit, MI), 1988.

*Bo: The Bo Schembechler Story* (with Bo Schembechler), Warner Books (New York, NY), 1989.

*Live Albom II*, foreword by Ernie Harwell, *Detroit Free Press* (Detroit, MI), 1990.

*Live Albom III: Gone to the Dogs*, *Detroit Free Press* (Detroit, MI), 1992.

*Fab Five: Basketball, Trash Talk, the American Dream*, Warner Books (New York, NY), 1993.

*Live Albom IV*, foreword by Dave Barry, *Detroit Free Press* (Detroit, MI), 1995.

*Tuesdays with Morrie: An Old Man, a Young Man, and Life's Greatest Lesson*, Doubleday (New York, NY), 1997.



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### Past Writings: (Continued)

*The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, Hyperion (New York, NY), 2003.

Contributor to periodicals, including *Gentlemen's Quarterly*, *Sports Illustrated*, *New York Times*, and *Sport*; contributor to MSNBC.com.

### Media Adaptations:

*Tuesdays with Morrie: An Old Man, a Young Man, and Life's Greatest Lesson* was adapted as an Emmy Award-winning television movie, aired by American Broadcasting Companies, Inc. (ABC), 1999, and as a play produced in New York, NY, 2002. Albom adapted his book *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* for a television movie produced by Hallmark Entertainment, aired by ABC, 2004. *Bo: The Bo Schembechler Story* and *Tuesdays with Morrie* were adapted as audio books.

### Sidelights:

Mitch Albom, a journalist for the *Detroit Free Press*, has earned national attention and awards for penning sports columns distinguished by insight, humor, and empathy. Many of his columns have been collected in books that include *The Live Albom: The Best of Mitch Albom*, *Live Albom II*, *Live Albom III: Gone to the Dogs*, and *Live Albom IV*. Disdaining the questionable ethical conduct, drug problems, and overinflated egos often found in the sports world, Albom highlights instances of athletic courage and determination while providing fact-based commentary on a team's performance.

After stints in New York and Florida, Albom arrived in Detroit, Michigan, in 1985 as a staff member of the *Detroit Free Press*. Introducing himself to his new audience in his first column, he explained that readers could expect "some opinion, some heart, some frankness. Some laughs. Some out of the ordinary." Albom also made a good first impression with area sports fans by rejecting the negative stereotype—a crime-ridden and dying city—that Detroit held for the nation. "Some people apparently look at a new job in Detroit as something to be endured or tolerated," he told his audience, going on to say: "I, for one, am thrilled to be here. For sports, they don't make towns any better than this one."

One of Albom's most distinguished traits as a columnist has been his sympathy with disappointed fans when local professional teams struggle unsuccessfully for championships. He commiserated with area readers in 1988 when Detroit's basketball team, the Pistons, battled to the National Basketball Association (NBA) finals and pushed Los Angeles to a full seven-game series, only to lose the last game by three points. He reasoned in one column, included in *The Live Albom*: "They went further than any Pistons team before them. They came onto the stage as brutes and left with an entire nation's respect—for their courage, for their determination, for their talent. . . . They took on all comers. . . . They could beat any team in the league. They just couldn't beat them all." A year earlier, when the underdog Red Wings reached the National Hockey League (NHL) semifinals but lost, Albom reported how, on the long flight home, the players dealt with this defeat. Upon learning that a devoted fan had flown to Edmonton to watch the game, Detroit players chipped in to reimburse him for his ticket. They also joined in on a chorus of that fan's favorite cheer. Witnessing this, Albom wrote, "Amazing. Here were these bruising, scarred, often toothless men, on the night of a season-ending loss, singing a high school cheer. Simply because it made an old guy happy. Many people will remember goals and saves and slap shots from this season. I hope I never forget that cheer."

With columns such as these, Albom earned a loyal following and a reputation as a blue-collar sports fan. His success in print carried over to other media, including radio and television. He joined the staff of rock station WLLZ in 1985, initially serving as sports director. In 1988 he and co-host Mike Stone began a weekly program,



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### Sidelights: (Continued)

The Sunday Sports Albom. Guests included both local and national sports figures and the program's format allowed calls by listeners. His stellar guest list was evidence of the comfortable rapport Albom shared with many area athletes and coaches. This accord extended beyond interviews; in 1987 he was even a good luck charm for Detroit's Red Wings. As he explained in a column reprinted in *The Live Albom*, "I am not sure when my car and the fortunes of the Red Wings actually became intertwined. I do know [coach] Jacques Demers and I have now driven to five playoff games together and Detroit has won all five, and now even Demers, who is not superstitious, is asking me what time we're leaving."

Albom's relationship with former University of Michigan football coach Bo Schembechler led to a collaboration on Schembechler's autobiography, *Bo: The Bo Schembechler Story*. Respected as a top college coach for his Big-Ten championships and frequent bowl appearances, Schembechler reputedly had a quick temper and churlish personality. In *Bo* Albom presents Schembechler as a sincere family man whose surly demeanor was a deliberate act and who inspired love and respect from his football players. Albom credits Schembechler with turning the Michigan football program around. Albom notes a greater accomplishment, however: Schembechler ran a program free from rules violations and saw his athletes graduate. A *New York Times Book Review* contributor concluded that while *Bo* does not offer much new information about Schembechler, the work strengthened Schembechler's position as a role model for college athletes.

While Albom soon reigned as the darling of the Detroit sports scene, he also became involved with his share of controversy. He raised the ire of a Detroit Tigers pitcher with a column, and eleven months later had a bucket of ice water dumped over his head in the Tigers' clubhouse because the pitcher blamed his disintegrating effectiveness on Albom's commentary. Albom also broke the 1988 story of the after-curfew bar visits of several Red Wings players, reporting that, when confronted with the news, the coach "looked as if he was going to cry." Albom added that this black mark on the team's accomplishments was "not the story I wanted to write. Not the one you wanted to read." In these instances, a prediction Albom made in his first column came true: "I try to be honest. . . . This is not always a pretty job. Sometimes you have to write that the good guys lost, or that somebody's favorite baseball hero in the whole world just checked into the rehab clinic. Still, sports are the only show in town where no matter how many times you go back, you never know the ending. That's special."

Albom expanded his writing beyond the realm of sports with his 1997 publication *Tuesdays with Morrie: An Old Man, a Young Man, and Life's Greatest Lesson*. The book, which was the top-selling nonfiction title of 1998, sprang from Albom's weekly visits with his former professor, Morrie Schwartz. While a student at Brandeis University, Albom was strongly influenced by the unconventional Schwartz, who urged his students to disdain high-paying careers and follow their hearts instead. Upon graduating, Albom promised to keep in touch with his teacher, but he neither called nor visited Schwartz for the next sixteen years. Watching television one night, he saw Schwartz on the ABC television program *Nightline*. The professor had been diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), commonly known as Lou Gehrig's disease. A hasty trip to Massachusetts to see his old mentor led to a weekly meeting over the next fourteen weeks until Schwartz's died. Albom was struck by the realization that although he was young, healthy, and wildly successful, his old, dying teacher was a much happier, more peaceful person. He began to write a book based on their conversations, in part to help defray Schwartz's medical expenses.

*Tuesdays with Morrie* is "a slender but emotionally weighty account of Albom's final seminar with Schwartz," in the words of *People* contributor William Plummer. Albom relates the way in which, without even realizing it, he had slowly abandoned his youthful ideals to become cynical, spiritually shallow, and materialistic. Working around the clock to maintain his career left him little time for reflection. Schwartz helped his former student to refocus his life and in chapters that focus on fear, aging, greed, family, forgiveness, and other topics, "the reader hears Morrie advise Mitch to slow down and savor the moment . . . to give up striving for bigger toys and, above





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### Sidelights: (Continued)

all, to invest himself in love," explained Plummer. "Familiar pronouncements, of course, but what makes them fresh is Morrie's eloquence, his lack of self-pity . . . and his transcendent humor, even in the face of death."

"One gets whiffs of Jesus, the Buddha, Epicurus, Montaigne and Erik Erikson" from Schwartz's discourses, related Alain de Botton in the *New York Times Book Review*. Yet Botton objected that the "true and sometimes touching pieces of advice" dispensed by Schwartz "don't add up to a very wise book. Though Albom insists that Schwartz's words have transformed him, it's hard to see why . . . Because Albom fails to achieve any real insight into his own . . . life, it's difficult for the reader to trust in his spiritual transformation." In contrast, a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer maintained: "Far from being awash in sentiment, the dying man retains a firm grasp on reality," and called *Tuesdays with Morrie* "an emotionally rich book and a deeply affecting memorial to a wise mentor." In a review for the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Dante Chinni commented that *Tuesdays with Morrie* "made Albom something akin to the Kahlil Gibran of disease and spirituality, quoted all over the Internet as a source of inspiration." The book did open doors for the sports journalist, who became a sought-after speaker and was even asked by fellow columnist Dave Barry to join a literary rock band called the Rock Bottom Remainers, which includes Stephen King, Barry, and Amy Tan on its roster.

Albom followed *Tuesdays with Morrie* with his first novel, 2003's *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*. As he told *Publishers Weekly*, the novel is based on stories his Uncle Eddie told him as a child. In the novel, Eddie is a grizzled old man, a war veteran who works as a maintenance man at a fairground. Both he and the people who employ him think little of his worth as a person, and it is not until Eddie dies saving the life of a little girl that the value of his life becomes clear. In heaven, Eddie meets five people who help him gain understanding about life's meaning. A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer commented that, "One by one, these mostly unexpected characters remind him that we all live in a vast web of interconnection with other lives; that all our stories overlap; that acts of sacrifice seemingly small or fruitless do affect others; and that loyalty and love matter to a degree we can never fathom."

Albom continues to write on difficult moral questions—among them euthanasia, medical marijuana, and questions of personal responsibility and law suits—in his newspaper columns and to talk about them on his syndicated radio programs. As Chinni noted in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, "Albom is not a typical sportswriter or a typical anything, for that matter . . . *Tuesdays with Morrie* . . . put him in a league of his own." Albom described his role to Chinni: "Communicator . . . That's all . . . I'm talking about a lot of things that I'm writing about and I'm writing about a lot of things that I think about. For me it's sort of one job with a lot of tentacles."



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### Sidelights: (Continued)

#### Books:

Albom, Mitch, *The Live Albom*, Detroit Free Press, 1988, pp. 12, 208, 218.

Albom, Mitch, *Live Albom II*, Detroit Free Press, 1990, pp. 33, 35, 44.

#### Periodicals:

*Back Stage*, November 29, 2002, p. 32; January 17, 2003, p. 9.

*Book*, September, 2000, p. 10.

*Books*, December, 1998, p. 22.

*Bookwatch*, February, 1998, p. 11.

*Christian Science Monitor*, April 30, 1998, Robin Whitten, review of audio version of Tuesday with Morrie, p. B4.

*Columbia Journalism Review*, September, 2001, p. 18.

*Detroit Free Press*, March 30, 1993, p. C1; August 27, 2003.

*Hollywood Reporter*, November 23, 2002, p. 7.

*Image*, winter, 1998, p. 395.

*Kirkus Reviews*, July 1, 1997, p. 993.

*Kliatt*, May, 1998, p. 56.

*Knight-Ridder/Tribune News Service*, June 9, 1999, p. K3422; October 16, 2001, p. K0231; November 13, 2002, p.

K5785; August 27, 2003, p. K7744.

*Lancet*, October 17, 1998, Faith McLellan, "A Teacher to the Last," p. 1318.

*Los Angeles Business Journal*, April 24, 2000, p. 65; December 11, 2000, p. 53; August 5, 2002, p. 39; September 30, 2002, p. 47.

*Modern Healthcare*, February 10, 2003, p. 34.

*Multichannel News*, January 29, 2001, p. 20.

*New York*, December 2, 2002, p. 78.

*New York Times Book Review*, November 19, 1989, Charles Salzberg, review of Bo: The Bo Schembechler Story, p. 44; November 23, 1997, Alain de Botton, review of *Tuesdays with Morrie*, p. 20.

*People*, January 12, 1998, William Plummer, "Memento Morrie: Morrie Schwartz, While Dying, Teaches Writer Mitch Albom the Secrets of Living," p. 141.

*Publishers Weekly*, October 5, 1990, review of audio version of Bo, p. 73; June 30, 1997, review of *Tuesdays with Morrie*, p. 60; March 2, 1998, review of audio version of *Tuesdays with Morrie*, p. 30; October 9, 2000, Daisy Maryles and Dick Donahue, "ThreeYears+ with Morrie," p. 22; July 28, 2003, review of *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, p. 18; August 18, 2003, Tracy Cochran, "Everyone Matters" (interview).

*Quest*, March-April, 1998, p. 42.

*Sports Illustrated*, May 15, 1995, "Record Albom," p. 22; December 20, 1999, "Morrie Glory: His Bestseller Now a Hit TV Movie, Sportswriter Mitch Albom Continues His Crossover Act," p. 28; March 5, 2001, p. 16.

*Tikkun*, March, 2001, p. 75.

*Tribune Books* (Chicago, IL), December 12, 1993, p. 3.

*TV Guide*, December 4, 1999, "These Days with Morrie," p. 39.

*Wall Street Journal*, March 14, 1988, Bradley A. Stertz, "It's Probably Not Too Smart for Us to Publicize This Kind of Revenge," p. 29.

*Writer's Digest*, September, 2001, p. 38.

*Writing!*, April-May, 2003, p. 11.



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**Sidelights:** (Continued)

**Online:**

Albom Online, <http://www.albom.com/> (March 19, 2004).

*Contemporary Authors Online*, Thomson Gale, 2004.



## Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on:  
*Tuesdays with Morrie*

### Random House Reading Group Guide:

Let's talk about Mitch and Morrie

1. Did your opinion about Mitch change as the book went on? In what way?
2. Who do you think got more out of their Tuesday meetings, Mitch or Morrie? In what ways? How do you think each would answer this question?
3. Do you think Mitch would have come back to Morrie's house the second time if he hadn't been semi-idled by the newspaper strike?
4. Discuss Morrie's criticisms of Mitch throughout the book. Do you think Morrie should have been tougher on him? Easier?
5. Do you think Mitch would have listened if Morrie hadn't been dying? Does impending death automatically make one's voice able to penetrate where it couldn't before?

Let's talk about death

6. Does this book make Morrie's death a public event? If so, how is it similar to other public deaths we've experienced as a society? How is it different?
7. Morrie referred to himself as a bridge, a person who is in between life and death, which makes him useful to others as a tool to understand both. Talk about other literary, historical, political or religious figures who have also served this purpose.
8. Most of us have read of people discussing the way they'd like to die, or, perhaps, have talked about it ourselves. One common thought is that it would be best to live a long, healthy life and then die suddenly in one's sleep. After reading this book, what do you think about that? Given a choice, would Morrie have taken that route instead of the path he traveled?
9. On "Nightline," Morrie spoke to Ted Koppel of the pain he still felt seventy years after his mother's death. Is your experience with loss similar or different? Does what you've read in this book help ease any of the pain?
10. Morrie was seventy-six years old when diagnosed with ALS. How might he have reacted if he'd contracted the disease when he was Mitch's age? Would Morrie have come to the same conclusions? Felt the same peace and acceptance? Or was his experience also a function of his age?

Let's talk about meaning

11. Try the "effect of silence" exercise that Mitch described. What do you learn from it?
12. Talk about the role of meaningful coincidence, synchronicity, in the book and in Mitch and Morrie's friendship.



## Book: Tuesdays with Morrie

### Random House Reading Group Guide: (Continued)

13. Morrie told Mitch about the “tension of opposites.” Talk about this as a metaphor for the book and for society.

14. Mitch made a list of topics about which he wanted Morrie’s insight and clarity. In what ways would your list be the same or different?

15. Discuss the book in terms of structure, voice, and tone, paying attention to Mitch’s use of flashbacks and other literary devices. How do his choices add to the meaning?

16. Are college students today missing out because they don’t have the meaningful experiences that students faced in the 1960s had? Do you think Morrie thought they were?

17. Morrie said: “If you’ve found meaning in your life, you don’t want to go back. You want to go forward.” Is this true in your experience?

Let’s talk about religion, culture, and ritual

18. Morrie believed, “You have to be strong enough to say if the culture doesn’t work, don’t buy it. Create your own.” How can people do this? How can this book help?

19. As his visits with Morrie continued, Mitch explored some other cultures and religions and how each views death. Discuss these and others that you’ve studied.

20. To the very end, Mitch arrived at Morrie’s house with food. Discuss the importance of this ritual.

Let’s talk about relationships

21. Was Morrie judging people who choose not to have kids with his statement: “If you want the experience of having complete responsibility for another human being, and to learn how to love and bond in the deepest way, then you should have children.” Whether or not he was, do you agree?

22. Mitch wrote, “Perhaps this is one reason I was drawn to Morrie. He let me be where my brother would not.” Discuss Mitch’s relationship with Peter.

23. Discuss the practical side of Morrie’s advice: “Only an open heart will allow you to float equally between everyone.” How could this advice be useful the next time you’re in a social or other situation where you feel out of place or uncomfortable?

24. Morrie said that in marriage, “Your values must be alike.” In what ways to you agree or disagree?

25. Would Morrie’s lessons have carried less weight if Mitch and Peter hadn’t resumed contact by the book’s end?





## Book: Tuesdays with Morrie

### Random House Reading Group Guide: (Continued)

#### Recommended Reading:

Chinua Achebe: *Things Fall Apart*

James Agee: *A Death in the Family*

Margaret Atwood: *Alias Grace*

W. H. Auden: *Collected Poems*

Richard Ford: *Independence Day*

Robert Fulghum: *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*

Joan Furman and David McNabb: *The Dying Time*

Ernest J. Gaines: *A Lesson Before Dying*

John Gunther: *Death Be Not Proud*



## Book: Tuesdays with Morrie

### Barnes & Noble SparkNotes Study Guide:

<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/morrie/>

### Analysis of Major Characters

#### Morrie Schwartz

The title character of *Tuesdays with Morrie* has spent most of his life as a professor of sociology at Brandeis University, a position he has fallen into only “by default.” He is an excellent teacher, and retires only after he begins to lose control of his body to ALS, Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, also known as Lou Gherig’s disease. The disease ravages his body, but, ironically, leaves his mind as lucid as ever. He realizes that his time is running out, and that he must share his wisdom on “The Meaning of Life” with the world before it is too late to do so. Mitch serves as a vehicle through which he can convey this wisdom, to Mitch personally, and, more indirectly, to a larger audience which he reaches after his death by means of the book itself. He and Mitch plan for the book during his dying days, deeming it their “final thesis together.” He is also able to reach a vast audience through his interviews with Ted Koppel, which are broadcast nation-wide on ABC-TV’s “Nightline.”

Morrie has an unmistakable knack for reaching through to the human essence of every individual he befriends. He is even able to deconstruct Koppel, who is a thick-skinned national celebrity. He does so by asking Koppel what he feels is “close to his heart.” Love is his main method of communication. Just as he reaches Koppel through his thick celebrity skin, he reaches Mitch through his dense veneer of professionalism and greed. He sees that Mitch has surrendered his sense of self to the beliefs of popular culture, and urges him to reclaim the kind, caring young man he once was at Brandeis. In telling Mitch stories of his life experiences and personal beliefs, he teaches him to reject the corrupt mores endorsed by popular culture in favor of his personal, ethical system of values. He does not immerse himself in the media as most of America does, but instead invests himself in people and their potential to love.

Morrie also chooses to react against popular cultural norms in his acceptance of his own debilitating disease and imminent death. He has lived and loved to his fullest extent, and is intent on continuing to do so as he dies. Having always lived as a fiercely independent man, it is difficult for him to rely on others for all of his basic needs, though he refuses to be embarrassed by his physical shortcomings, and tries in earnest to enjoy “being a baby again.” In his childhood, he has been deprived of love and attention, and now that he is once again reliant on others as he was in his infancy, he thrives on the love and physical affection provided by his friends and family.

#### Mitch Albom

Mitch is a man with a good heart who has surrendered his dreams of becoming a musician to dreams of material wealth and professional success. He has grown disillusioned and values money over love. After working himself nearly to death, leaving little time for himself or his wife Janine, the union to which he belongs at the Detroit newspaper he works for goes on a long strike, and for the first time, he finds himself with neither work nor a steady paycheck. Upon learning of the strike, he grows increasingly frustrated by the career and life decisions he has made, and experiences a life-altering epiphany in which he realizes that he needs to change. He wants a chance at self-redemption, a chance to reassess his priorities so that he may recreate for himself a fulfilling life, enriched with people and activities that give him meaning and purpose.

It is only with Morrie’s encouragement that Mitch is able to realize the time he has wasted in all of the years he has immersed himself in work that now seems relatively meaningless. With each week he travels to visit Morrie and listen to his lessons, his view of what he has missed and what he must change in his life becomes more lucid. As he watches Morrie die, he realizes that, like his professor, he wants to die knowing that he has lived his



## Book: Tuesdays with Morrie

### Barnes & Noble SparkNotes Study Guide: (Continued)

<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/morrie/>

life to its fullest extent, certain that he has loved and forgiven himself and others as often and as sincerely as he could. He sees in Morrie the man he aspires to be, a man who values love over money, and people over tabloid gossip and superficial vanity. It is because of Morrie's influence that he is able to change his own life and outlook to become more like his professor, his mentor, who has encouraged him to be loving and kind since his college days, when he walked around campus with a veneer of toughness. Only Morrie can penetrate the toughness that has grown around Mitch's heart, which he ultimately succeeds in doing.

#### Peter

Mitch's younger brother, Peter lives in Spain after having moved to Europe immediately after graduating from high school. He is now suffering from pancreatic cancer, and flies to various European cities seeking treatment. However, he continually refuses to accept help from his family, namely from Mitch, as he has, for the most part, estranged himself from them after his departure from the United States. He does not want help from Mitch or any other member of his family presumably because he has too much pride to accept it. Growing up, he earned a reputation as the family bad boy, as where Mitch had been the family's clean-cut, straight-A student. Mitch's brother is a man who does not want help from a family he has deserted, and who feels that he must prove himself and his independence to them.

Much like Mitch had during his college years at Brandeis, Peter protects himself with a thick veneer of toughness. He has not asked for help from his family since his high school graduation, and has no intention of doing so as an adult. When Mitch contacts him, he is very reluctant to reestablish a relationship with his brother, and leaves a curt message that he is doing just fine and does not need anyone else's help. He also reminds Mitch that he does not want to talk about his illness. But as Mitch learns from Morrie, everyone, to some degree, needs other people to survive, thus the quote by Auden which Morrie recites numerous times during his lessons with Mitch, "Love or perish." Despite his fierce independence and refusal of help, Peter also needs the love of friends and family to survive his cancer. He realizes this after Mitch is persistent in his attempts to speak with him. Mitch does not contact his brother so that he may pity or dote on him because of his cancer, but because he wants to rekindle some aspect of the loving relationship they shared as children.

### Themes, Motifs, and Symbols

#### Themes

##### The Rejection of Popular Cultural Mores in Favor of Self-created Values

Each of Morrie's lessons contributes to a larger, all-encompassing message that each individual, Mitch especially, should reject popular cultural values, and instead develop his own. As Morrie sees it, popular culture is a dictator under which the human community must suffer. In his own life, Morrie has fled this cultural dictatorship in favor of creating his own culture founded on love, acceptance, and open communication. He develops his own culture as a revolt against the media-driven greed, violence and superficiality which has tarnished the mores promoted by popular culture. Morrie encourages Mitch to free himself of this corrupt, dictatorial culture in favor of his own, and it is only when he does that he begins to reassess his life and rediscover fulfillment.



## Book: Tuesdays with Morrie

### Barnes & Noble SparkNotes Study Guide: (Continued)

<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/morrie/>

#### "Love Or Perish"

Morrie recites a quote by his favorite poet, W. H. Auden, to encompass one of his most important lessons to Mitch: in the absence of love, there is a void that can be filled only by loving human relationships. When love abounds, Morrie says, a person can experience no higher sense of fulfillment. Throughout his fourteen Tuesday lessons with Mitch, Morrie divulges that love is the essence of every person, and every relationship, and that to live without it, as Auden says, is to live with nothing. The importance of love in his life is especially clear to Morrie as he nears his final days, for without the meticulous care of those he loves, and who love him, he would perish. Morrie clings to life not because he is afraid of dying or because he fears what will become of him in the afterlife, but because his greatest dying wish is to share his story with Mitch so that he may share it with the world. Morrie clings just long enough to divulge the essence of his story, then releases himself to death, leaving Mitch and his audience with the message that love brings meaning to experience, and that without it, one may as well be dead.

#### Acceptance Through Detachment

In his quest to accept his impending death, Morrie consciously "detaches himself from the experience" when he suffers his violent coughing spells, all of which come loaded with the possibility of his last breath. Morrie derives his method of detachment from the Buddhist philosophy that one should not cling to things, as everything that exists is impermanent. In detaching, Morrie is able to step out of his tangible surroundings and into his own state of consciousness, namely for the sake of gaining perspective and composure in a stressful situation. Morrie does not intend to stop feeling or experiencing in his detachment, but instead, wants to experience wholly, for it is only then that he is able to let go, to detach from a life-threatening experience which renders him fearful and tense. He does not want to die feeling upset, and in these frightening moments, detaches so that he may accept the impermanence of his life and embrace his death, which he knows may come at any moment.

#### Motifs

##### The Media

The media is continually portrayed in *Tuesdays with Morrie* as being inherently evil, sucking Mitch dry of his passion and ambition, and feeding the public stories of murder and hatred that have ravaged the goodness of the world's general community. Mitch, who is out of work due to a unionized strike at the Detroit newspaper he writes for, continually notices the horrific events reported by the media he for a long time has been a part of. He reads about homicides, torture, theft, and a dozen other gruesome crimes that serve to juxtapose the evil of the popular culture with the goodness of the world Morrie has created for himself. The O.J. Simpson murder trial also makes multiple appearances throughout the book, and provides Mitch with evidence to support his claim that the general populous has become dependent on, and somewhat addicted to, media coverage of relatively meaningless stories, stories that contribute nothing to personal development or goodness as a human being.

#### Reincarnation and Renewal

Reincarnation and renewal are presented as facets of both life and death; in life, Morrie teaches that a person is ever-changing, and in death, looks forward to some form of new life with the natural progression of the life cycle. With Morrie as his mentor, Mitch is able to reincarnate himself in life, transforming a man who was once motivated by material wealth into a man who is motivated by a passion to love, and to emulate the man who has





## Book: Tuesdays with Morrie

### Barnes & Noble SparkNotes Study Guide: (Continued)

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so touched his life. Morrie reveals that despite his old age, he is still changing, as every person does until their dying day.

#### Food

Each Tuesday, Mitch brings with him a bag of food from the grocery store for Morrie to enjoy, as he knows that his professor's favorite hobby, second to dancing, is eating. Morrie can no longer dance, and soon, he can no longer eat the food that Mitch brings him, either, as his health and strength have deteriorated so much, he can no longer ingest solids. The food that he brings for Morrie serves as a reminder for Mitch of the days he and his professor would eat together in the cafeteria at Brandeis, when he had been young and passionate, and Morrie energetic and in good health. Now, Mitch has been corrupted by commercial wealth, and Morrie by his illness. Although he knows that Morrie can no longer eat solids, Mitch continues to bring food each week because he so fears Morrie's fast-approaching death. The food Mitch brings him acts as a means by which to cling to Morrie and the fond memories Mitch has of his favorite professor. Mitch also feels that food is the only gift he can give to Morrie, and feels helpless as to how to soothe him any other way.

#### Symbols

##### Pink hibiscus plant

As Morrie's body deteriorates, so does the condition of the hibiscus plant. The plant's pink petals wither and fall as Morrie grows increasingly dependent on his aides and on oxygen. As his death approaches, so does the death of the plant. It is continually used as a metaphor for Morrie's life and for life itself. Like the plant, humans, Morrie in particular, experience a natural life cycle, which inevitably ends in death. Morrie must accept this inevitable fate, as must Mitch.

##### Waves on the ocean

Morrie recounts a story he had heard about a small wave seeing the waves ahead of him crash on the shore, disappearing into nothingness. He suddenly brims with fear upon the realization that he too will soon 'crash on the shore' and, die as the wave fears he will. This little wave confides his fear in another wave who comforts him with the news that he will not crash and die, but will instead return to become a small part of the larger ocean. This small wave is symbolic of Morrie, as he too is on the brink of crashing into a theoretical shore, a symbolic embodiment of his death. Like the wave, Morrie is comforted by the knowledge that he will soon return to something larger in the afterlife. Morrie's affinity for the parable denotes his belief in a form of reincarnation, which he understands as intrinsic part of the natural life cycle.

##### Morrie's bed

Morrie's aphorism, "When you're in bed, you're dead," eventually comes true. Throughout Morrie's struggle with ALS, he refuses to stay in bed, as he sees it as a form of surrender, and instead opts to rest in the chair in his study. Morrie intends to live his last days as fully as he can, and knows that if he is to remain in bed, he will surrender himself to death by forfeiting the simple enjoyment he gets from lying in his study. In his study, photographs of loved ones, and the books he has collected in his lifetime surround Morrie. There, he can look outside of his window, and though he cannot go outside, he admires the beauty of the seasons and the plant and animal life outdoors. It is not until Morrie's final days that he does stay in bed, when he has at last accepted and readied himself for death.



## Book: Tuesdays with Morrie

### Barnes & Noble SparkNotes Study Guide: (Continued)

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#### Important Quotations Explained

Take my condition. The things I am supposed to be embarrassed about now—not being able to walk, not being able to wipe my ass, waking up some mornings wanting to cry—there is nothing innately embarrassing about them. It's the same for women not being thin enough, or men not being rich enough. It's just what our culture would have you believe. Don't believe it.

#### Explanation for Quotation #1

Morrie speaks these words of advice to Mitch during their eleventh Tuesday together, when they talk specifically about culture. Gradually, Morrie has come to accept his physical handicaps, just as he has come to accept his impending death. He complains that the culture is wrong to deem natural physical need as socially embarrassing, and thus he refuses to believe that his handicaps are shameful. In rejecting the values of the popular culture, Morrie creates his own set of mores, which accommodate the physical shortcomings popular culture finds pitiable and embarrassing. As Morrie sees it, popular culture is a dictator under which the human community must suffer. He has already suffered enough from his disease, and does not see why he should seek social acceptance if it is not conducive to his personal happiness. Throughout the book, popular culture is portrayed as a vast brain-washing machine, wiping clean the minds of the public, and replacing the inherent kindness they possess at birth with a ruthless greed and selfish focus.

You see, . . . you closed your eyes. That was the difference. Sometimes you cannot believe what you see, you have to believe what you feel. And if you are ever going to have people trust you, you must feel that you can trust them, too—even when you're in the dark. Even when you're falling.

#### Explanation for Quotation #2

Morrie says this to his class in a flash back during the second Tuesday. He has asked his class to perform a trust fall exercise, in which the students test one another's trust and reliability by doing trust falls; one student will fall straight backwards and must rely on another student to catch them. Not one student can trust another until one girl falls without flinching. Morrie notes that the girl had closed her eyes, and says that this exercise serves as a metaphor for the secret to trust in relationships; one must sometimes trust blindly, relying only on what they feel to guide them in their decision-making. He uses the exercise to teach his students that trustworthiness is a quality shared by two people in a partnership, and that each person takes a risk in trusting the other. This risk, however, is a risk that people must take. Morrie teaches his students that trust is blind; one can only judge whether or not to trust another based on an instinctive feeling, not because of any rational judgment or method of thinking. To trust someone is to close your eyes and fall back, hoping that the person your instincts have told you is trustworthy will catch you and keep you from harm.

As you grow, you learn more. If you stayed as ignorant as you were at twenty-two, you'd always be twenty-two. Aging is not just decay, you know. It's growth. It's more than the negative that you're going to die, it's the positive that you understand you're going to die, and that you live a better life because of it.

#### Explanation for Quotation #3

Morrie speaks these words of advice to Mitch on their seventh Tuesday together, when they discuss the common fear of aging. Morrie tells Mitch that the happiness of youth is a farce, as not only do young people suffer



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very real miseries, but they do not have the wisdom of age to deal with them. Morrie has never feared aging; he embraces it. He believes that if he were to wish for youth, that would indicate his dissatisfaction with the life he has lived. He explains to Mitch that to fight age is fight a hopeless battle, because aging and death are inevitable, and a natural part of the life cycle. Morrie has lived through every age up to his own, and he is therefore a part of each of them. He does not wish to return to these particular ages, as each of them are constituents of the man he is now. He is more eager to explore new frontiers he must face in the future, even if that future is very limited. In accepting his own death, Morrie is able to savor the little time he has left to live, instead of wasting away, frustrated and angry that his time on earth is soon to end.

The truth is . . . once you learn how to die, you learn how to live.

#### Explanation for Quotation #4

Morrie says this on the fourth Tuesday in response to Mitch's question about how one can prepare for death. He responds with a Buddhist philosophy that every day, one must ask the bird on his shoulder if that day is the day he will die. The philosophy serves as a metaphor for his awareness that his death may come at any moment. The bird itself is symbolic of Morrie's consciousness that his death is fast-approaching, and his readiness to accept it when it does arrive. He hopes that Mitch will realize that this bird is on everyone's shoulder at every moment of their lives, despite how young or old they may be. When he tells Mitch that one must know how to die before one can know how to live, he means that one must accept the possibility of one's own death before he can truly appreciate what he has on earth, as the sobering awareness that one day, it will all be out of reach, prompts the urge to appreciate and value what one can have only for a limited period of time, and to use every moment of that time doing something that one will not regret when the bird sings its last note.

After the funeral, my life changed. I felt as if time were suddenly precious, water going down an open drain, and I could not move quickly enough. No more playing music at half-empty night clubs. No more writing songs in my apartment, songs that no one would hear.

#### Explanation for Quotation #5

Mitch reveals this resolution in the third chapter of the book, *The Student*, in which he describes the passionate, earnest, innocent young man he had been before entrenching himself in greed and material wealth. Upon the untimely death of his favorite uncle, Mitch's outlook on life is forever changed. He suddenly feels that the time is precious, and is compelled to live his life to its fullest potential, which, at the time, he believes is the attainment of financial success. The quote serves as Mitch's explanation of how he has transformed from an honest, hopeful young man into a money-grubbing professional who has abandoned his long-harbored dreams in exchange for financial security. It is clear that Mitch feels disconnected with the young man he once was at Brandeis, but desperately wants to reestablish a connection with his former ambitions and ethical values. Mitch had abandoned his dreams for musical success at a very vulnerable period in his life, as he had grown increasingly discouraged by his failure in playing the nightclub circuit. The death of his favorite uncle only served to compound his disillusionment, and, more than any other factor, influenced Mitch to envision life as a race to beat the clock, sucking dry every moment to attain wealth and power as a business professional.



## Book: Tuesdays with Morrie

### Barnes & Noble SparkNotes Study Guide: (Continued)

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#### Key Facts:

**Full Title:** *Tuesdays with Morrie: An Old Man, A young Man, and Life's Greatest Lesson*

**Author:** Mitch Albom

**Type of Work:** non-fiction

**Genre:** Autobiographical documentary

**Language:** English

**Time and Place Written:** Detroit, Michigan, mid-1990's

**Date of First Publication:** 1997

**Publisher:** Doubleday

**Narrator:** Mitch Albom

**Point of View:** The narrator speaks in the first person for the majority of the novel, with the exception of a few passages in which he had not been present. With the exception of these passages, the narrator provides a subjective view of all other characters introduced.

**Tone:** Mitch's narration uses very basic language, as most of the book is composed of dialogue between him and Morrie, word-for word conversations he has transcribed after having tape recorded them prior to Morrie's death. Mitch's attitude towards Morrie is nothing less than sweet and adoring.

**Tense:** Frequently shifts in tense from present to past; description of past events is relayed through a series of flash backs interspersed throughout present tense narrations.

**Setting (time):** Early-mid 1990s

**Setting (place):** West Newton, Massachusetts

**Protagonist:** Mitch Albom (and/or Morrie Schwartz)

**Major Conflict:** Morrie grapples to accept his impending death from ALS and is visited each Tuesday by his former star student, Mitch, who has become disillusioned by the popular culture.

**Rising Action:** Mitch grows increasingly unhappy with his occupation as a journalist and sees Morrie featured on "Nightline" one night as he is watching television.

**Climax:** Morrie is visited by Mitch for what will be the last time, and finally, after years of trying, gets Mitch to cry openly.

**Falling Action:** Mitch attends Morrie's funeral and conducts a conversation with him in his head as he had promised he would, even after his death.

**Themes:** The rejection of popular cultural mores in favor of self-created values; Love or perish; Acceptance through detachment

**Motifs:** Food; Reincarnation and renewal; The media

**Symbols:** Pink hibiscus plant; Morrie's bed; Waves on the ocean

**Foreshadowing:** One of Morrie's last aphorisms is, "When you're in bed, you're dead." On what will be his last visit to with Morrie, Mitch knows that death is fast- approaching, as Morrie has, after a long battle with ALS, moved from his study to the confines of his bed. Days later, Morrie dies in his bed.





## Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on:  
Tuesdays with Morrie

### Reviews:

#### *Publishers Weekly Review June 1997*

As a student at Brandeis University in the late 1970s, Albom was especially drawn to his sociology professor, Morris Schwartz. On graduation he vowed to keep in touch with him, which he failed to do until 1994, when he saw a segment about Schwartz on the TV program Nightline, and learned that he had just been diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease. By then a sports columnist for the *Detroit Free Press* and author of six books, including *Fab Five*, Albom was idled by the newspaper strike in the Motor City and so had the opportunity to visit Schwartz in Boston every week until the older man died. Their dialogue is the subject of this moving book in which Schwartz discourses on life, self-pity, regrets, aging, love and death, offering aphorisms about each e.g., "After you have wept and grieved for your physical losses, cherish the functions and the life you have left." Far from being awash in sentiment, the dying man retains a firm grasp on reality. An emotionally rich book and a deeply affecting memorial to a wise mentor, who was 79 when he died in 1995. (Sept.) Copyright 1998 *Publishers Weekly Reviews*

#### *Library Journal Review May 1997*

A *Detroit Free Press* journalist and best-selling author recounts his weekly visits with a dying teacher who years before had set him straight. Copyright 1997 Cahners Business Information.

#### *Kirkus Review July 1997*

Award-winning sportswriter Albom was a student at Brandeis University, some two decades ago, of sociologist Morrie Schwartz. Here Albom recounts how, recently, as the old man was dying, he renewed his warm relationship with his revered mentor. This is the vivid record of the teacher's battle with muscle-wasting amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or Lou Gehrig's disease. The dying man, largely because of his life-affirming attitude toward his death-dealing illness, became a sort of thanatopic guru, and was the subject of three Ted Koppel interviews on Nightline. That was how the author first learned of Morrie's condition. Albom well fulfilled the age-old obligation to visit the sick. He calls his weekly visits to his teacher his last class, and the present book a term paper. The subject: The Meaning of Life. Unfortunately, but surely not surprisingly, those relying on this text will not actually learn The Meaning of Life here. Albom does not present a full transcript of the regular Tuesday talks. Rather, he expands a little on the professor's aphorisms, which are, to be sure, unassailable. "Love is the only rational act," Morrie said. "Love each other or perish," he warned, quoting Auden. Albom learned well the teaching that "death ends a life, not a relationship." The love between the old man and the younger one is manifest. This book, small and easily digested, stopping just short of the maudlin and the mawkish, is on the whole sincere, sentimental, and skillful. (The substantial costs of Morrie's last illness, Albom tells us, were partly defrayed by the publisher's advance). Place it under the heading "Inspirational." "Death," said Morrie, "is as natural as life. It's part of the deal we made." If that is so (and it's not a notion quickly gainsaid), this book could well have been called "The Art of the Deal."—Copyright ©1997, *Kirkus Associates, LP*.